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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted to examine the relationship between instructor degree status (regular faculty versus graduate teaching assistants) and students' final course grades in basic public speaking courses. Analysis of data obtained from speech communication departmental records at Wichita State University revealed that during the six semester period (fall 1981 through spring 1984) 2,341 students were enrolled in 81 sections of basic public speaking taught by 24 instructors (7 regular faculty and 17 graduate teaching assistants). Results showed that graduate teaching assistants gave more B and incomplete grades while faculty gave more C and D grades. No significant differences were found for the overall grade point averages or for assignment of A, F, Audit, Withdraw, and Pass grades. These results indicated that teaching assistants may be more inclined to give students the benefit of the doubt due to lack of experience, lower standards, or more sympathy for students. The most frequent grade assigned by all instructors was a B although the C is defined by most grading systems as average. Such frequency suggests that the grading standards for a B are either too low or the application of the standards too lenient. The results suggest that basic course directors should analyze grade point averages and grade distribution patterns as well as work with teaching assistants to achieve desirable grading practices. (DF)

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INSTRUCTOR DEGREE STATUS AND STUDENT GRADES IN BASIC SPEECH: A RESEARCH REPORT

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between the degree status of the instructor (regular faculty versus graduate teaching assistants) and the final course grades assigned to students in the Basic Public Speaking course at Wichita State University during six semesters from Fall 1981 through Spring 1984. During this period seven regular faculty taught 1249 students in 43 sections, while seventeen GTAs taught 1029 students in 38 sections. Using a 4.0 scale, grade point averages were calculated from course letter grades in order to obtain grade point averages for each of the class sections by instructor status. A T-test revealed that there was not a significant difference between the mean GPA for regular faculty sections (2.40) versus GTA sections (2.45). However, T-tests did reveal a significant difference between means of four grade assignment variables (B, C, D, and Incomplete) assigned by the two instructor types. GTAs gave a significantly higher number of Bs and Incompletes, while regular faculty assigned significantly more Cs and Ds. Some possible reasons for these patterns (instructor experience, grading standards, and degree of sympathy for students) and other implications are discussed.

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INSTRUCTOR DEGREE STATUS AND STUDENT GRADES IN BASIC SPEECH: A RESEARCH REPORT

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One of the many tasks facing most basic course directors involves monitoring and coordinating the grading of students both by regular faculty and by graduate teaching assistants teaching the basic course. This task is complicated by the difficulties inherent in grading, the problem of training new graduate teaching assistants (many of whom have very little, if any, prior teaching experience), and the dilemma of trying to achieve some measure of standardization or at least similarity in grading across course sections.

Review of Literature

There are, of course, problems with any system of grading in and of itself (Warren, 1971), as well as problems with the ways in which various instructors assign grades differently from one another (Garrison, 1979). In addition, there has been considerable attention devoted to the issue of grade inflation in higher education over the last several decades (Garten and Olday, 1980), which has been attributed to such societal and institutional changes as leniency in grading during the Vietnamese War because of draft deferment, and the influx of academically unprepared minority students as a result of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Other contributing causes (Goldman, in press) include the changing attitudes and practices

of instructors, new administrative practices (such as criterion-referenced grading, liberalized withdrawal policies, etc.), job security factors (especially credit-hour production), and favorable student evaluations. Various surveys of grade trends indicate that there has been a cessation of the trend toward higher grades typical of the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, but not any regression back to earlier grading levels (Juola, 1980).

Further complicating the grading situation for most basic course directors is the problem of training and monitoring the teaching of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). Recent surveys of GTA training programs indicate that most GTAs have less than one year's teaching experience when they begin their duties (Yoder and Hugenberg, 1980), and that more than one-half of the GTAs surveyed felt insufficiently trained for their new roles as teachers (Kaufman-Everett and Backlund, 1980).

Because grade inflation and grading practices continue to be an issue at many colleges and universities, and because the task of the basic course director often includes the obligation to monitor grading across sections of the course taught by regular faculty and GTAs, one important factor in grading that should be examined is the differential (if any) between the final course grades assigned by regular faculty versus GTAs. The research done in this area appears somewhat contradictory. Boozer (1977) reports that in his study which covered four semesters demographic variables such as faculty rank and degree did not account for grading differences; whether GTAs were included is unclear. However, a study by J. Prather (cited by Boozer, 1977)

revealed that the grades given by part-time teachers, GTAs and instructors were higher than those given by other faculty members. In another study which analyzed data on 118 university social science classes (Hamilton, 1980), there was a reported negative correlation between grades assigned and instructor status (r=-.33); in other words, there was a tendency for full-time, tenure-track faculty to give lower grades than GTAs. Does that same pattern hold true for the basic speech course?

Procedures

This study attempts to answer that question by examining possible relationships between instructors' degree status and their assignment of grades to students. Data for the study were obtained from Speech Communication departmental records for the Basic Oral Communication Program on file at Wichita State University. Instructors' degree status was defined as employment as GTA or regular faculty (tenure track or continuing line). Assignment of grades to students was defined as final course grades given in the Basic Public Speaking course during six semesters from Fall 1981 through Spring 1984.

During that period, 2341 students were enrolled in 81 sections taught by 24 instructors. Seventeen GTAs taught 1029 students in 38 sections and seven regular faculty taught 1249 students in 43 sections. (499 students taught by 5 lecturers in 19 sections were eliminated from the above totals and from this study because the category of "lecturer" was ambiguous in terms of instructor degree status). Records yielded data as section totals for number of students enrolled, number of each letter grade (A, B, C, D, F) given, and number of Audit, Incomplete,

Withdrawal, and Passing grades (no grade points).

Data were transformed to provide units for statistical analysis using SPSSX statistical analysis procedures (Nie, 1983) on Wichita State University's IBM 3081D computer. Using a 4.0 scale, grade point averages were calculated from letter grades in order to obtain grade point averages for each of the class sections. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were calculated for the following variables: each of five letter grades (A, B, C, D, F), each of four non-credit grades (Aud, Inc, W, P), and section grade point averages. T-tests were used to determine significance of differences between means of each variable for regular faculty and GTAs.

Results

TABLE 1

Descriptive Statistics for Grades Assigned in All Sections (81)

Variable	Sum	Maximum	Minimum	Mean	Standard Deviation
A	296	11	0	3.65	2.51
B	934	19	1	11.53	3.75
C	459	11	0	5.67	2.58
D	166	6	0	2.05	1.60
F	238	11	0	2.94	2.02
AUDIT	1	1	0	.01	.11
INCOMPLETE	23	2	0	.28	.48
WITHDRAW	206	8	0	2.54	1.91
PASS	1	1	0	.01	.11
GPA		3.19	1.16	2.43	.353

Total, maximum and minimum numbers, means and standard deviations for each of the grade assignment variables examined in this study are presented in Table 1. The mean grade point average for 82 sections was 2.43.

TABLE 2

Observed Means and T-Test Results for Grade Assignment Variables by Instructor Status

Variable	Faculty Sections (N=43)	GTA Sections (N=38)	T-Value	Sig. Level
A	3.58	3.74	.27	.789
B	10.42	12.79	2.97	.004
C	6.21	5.05	-2.05	.043
D	2.47	1.58	-2.57	.012
F	2.93	2.95	.04	.970
AUDIT	.23	.00	-0.94	.350
INCOMPLETE	.16	.42	2.43	.018
WITHDRAW	2.86	2.18	-1.61	.112
PASS	.00	.03	1.06	.290
GPA	2.40	2.45	.66	.513

As shown in Table 2, significant differences between means for faculty and GTAs were identified for four grade assignment variables: B, C, D and Incomplete. GTAs gave a significantly larger number of B and Incomplete grades; faculty gave a significantly larger number of C and D grades. No significant differences between means for the two groups were found for overall grade point averages or for assignment of A, F, Audit, Withdraw and Pass.

Discussion

There are several aspects of these results that deserve some comment. First, GPA by instructor status (in Table 2) was clearly not statistically significant. GPAs of 2.40 (in faculty sections) or of 2.45 (in GTA sections) were not only quite similar, but also respectably low (C range). But GPA is clearly not as noteworthy a variable as grade distribution, at least in this study.

Second, grade distribution patterns (in Table 2) show that the number of As given by faculty and by GTAs were quite similar. The same is true of the number of Fs. This finding is not surprising, inasmuch as the extremes in any distribution are relatively easy to identify; the best and the worst are generally notable.

Third, GTAs gave a statistically greater number of Bs and Incompletes than faculty did (Table 2). Evidently, GTAs are more inclined to give students the benefit of the doubt in these areas than are faculty, (either because GTAs have less experience, lower standards, or more sympathy). This finding could indicate the need for greater emphasis upon articulating and standardizing grading practices in GTA training sessions.

Fourth, regular faculty gave a statistically greater number of Cs and Ds (Table 2) than did GTAs. In other words, faculty were more discriminating of student performance at this level, or less inclined to be lenient for whatever reason (greater experience, higher standards, or less sympathy).

Fifth, the mode or most frequent grade assigned was a B, not a C (Table 1). While the C is defined by most grading systems as an average grade, it was not the most frequently-occurring grade in this study. The grading standards for a B (probably a low B) are either too low or the application of the standards is too lenient.

An overall implication of this study is that Basic Course Directors should analyze not only GPAs but also grade distribution patterns in the basic course, and work with GTAs to achieve desired grading practices.

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